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'Black' and 'white schools' in the Netherlands: Toward a pedagogy of belonging, inclusivity and normality

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Introduction

As in many European countries, the Dutch education system is largely based on public and private schools. In general, public schools are accessible for all children regardless of their (parents') religious, philosophical or worldview orientation. These schools provide education on behalf of the State. Private schools, on the other hand, offer education that is grounded in a particular religious or ideological belief. Among these are Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish schools. These type of schools can either accept or refuse children depending on their parents' willingness to endorse the religious conviction of the school. In practice, Catholic and Protestant schools accept children from all creeds when parents agree to endorse the religious identity of the school. Furthermore, there are non-religious private schools with a specific educational or philosophical orientation, such as the Montessori, Dalton or Jena Plan schools.

All schools in the Netherlands are government funded. Article 23 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of education. Thus, individuals or groups are free to found schools based on their particular worldview orientation, and to establish curricula for their education. Nevertheless, all schools are subject to quality standards set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

The current narrative on 'black' and 'white schools' is embedded within the educational structure of the Netherlands and pertains only to the Dutch society as compared to other European countries (Gelder van, 2016). There are, however, different understandings of these notions. Generally speaking, 'black schools' refer to schools where 70 or more percent of the children come from non-Western migrant backgrounds. 'White schools' on the other hand refer to schools with predominantly white Dutch children (also 70 or more percent of the total school population). These notions are rather contested, as we will illustrate further on.

The first part of this paper discusses the contested notions of 'black' and 'white schools' to a certain length, by therefore reviewing different literary sources. These sources seem to suggest that freedom of education, dovetailed with parents' freedom to choose a particular school for their children (*vrije schoolkeuze*) may perpetuate the existing dichotomy between 'black' and 'white schools'. This binary occurrence upholds ethnic-cultural segregation in the Dutch education system to various degrees, irrespective of several attempts at desegregation, at municipal level.

The second part of this paper looks at how RE, in tandem with a 'pedagogy of belonging, inclusivity and normality' may contribute to a counter narrative vis-à-vis social exclusion and segregation in education (Karstens, 2005). In other words: **how can religious pedagogy contribute to creating brave spaces that supersede the notions of 'black' and 'white schools'?** Between these two parts we present a case as a best practice

example, which also serves as a counter ‘narrative’ to the so called ‘black school’ and constitutes excellence in education. Next, we examine the notions of belonging, inclusivity and normality as key constructs for a transformative pedagogy. In addition to these notions, we shall highlight the value of RE for such a transformative pedagogy, or pedagogy about hope (Winter, de, 2017). And in the final section we present our preliminary conclusion and recommendations for further research.

The origin of ‘black’ and ‘white schools’

The phenomena of ‘black’ and ‘white schools’ has its origin in the 1960s and 1970s. In those years, the Netherlands, like many other European countries, was in dire need of cheap laborers. West-European industrial companies needed unskilled personnel to fuel their factories and to keep pace with the economic demands of that time. These laborers, very often poorly educated, were recruited from countries around the Mediterranean, from former colonial territories and later from Northern Africa. Hence, in the Netherlands, many Turkish, Moroccan and Algerian immigrants arrived. The arrival of these guest laborers not only led to increased ethnic pluralism, it also sharpened the existing socio-economic segregation, both in society at large, and in education in particular (Bakker, 2012).

In the early 1970s member countries of the European Community (EC) began adopting a restrictive policy towards non-EC citizens, which affected guest laborers from these non-EC countries. Hence, in the Netherlands, in particular, a policy was adopted to reunite these laborers with their families who had stayed behind in their home countries (Lucassen and Lucassen, 2011). Due to their weak socio-economic status, Turkish and Moroccan families often resorted to disadvantaged areas, both in cities and other communities, where cheap, but poor housing was available. The immigrant children began visiting schools in their new neighborhoods, but had to overcome a language barrier. The Dutch government then presupposed that these children would eventually repatriate to their country of birth. To avoid any disconnection with their culture and native language, the Dutch government introduced *Onderwijs in Eigen Taal en Cultuur* (Education in Original Language and Culture – OETC). This education policy, as can be argued, led to a concentration of immigrant children – mostly Muslims – in schools that were traditionally populated by white Dutch children. But as the number of children from ethnic minorities increased, white Dutch parents began withdrawing their children from these schools and enrolling them in schools with none to less immigrant children, located in other districts. The motive behind such a decision is often linked to fear of quality loss, from which poor education results ensue. As a result of this so called ‘white flight’, schools in concentrated areas – i.e., districts where, according to the definition of the *Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau*, the population of the minorities is greater than their share in the urban population as a whole – have over the years turned into ‘black schools’. In such districts, relatively many low-educated immigrants with a social disadvantage live, usually mixed with native Dutch people with lower income. Statistics from *Onderwijsinspectie* (Inspectorate of Education, [2007]) show that children visiting ‘black schools’ often perform poorly. One main contributing factor seems to be deficiencies in the command of the Dutch language.

Since many 'black schools' were in a rather disadvantaged position (high repetition and drop-out rates, poor education performance, and frequent replacements within the teaching staff), the Dutch government provided financial support for non-Western migrant school children. Until 2006 that support was based on the number of migrant children. It enabled primary ('black') schools to hire extra personnel who were assigned to help these children to perform better. But from 2006 onwards there has been a change in government policy, thereby shifting focus from migrant children to the educational level of *all* parents. And at secondary education level general socio economic terms related to residence in deprived areas became the criterion for receiving additional government funds. This change of policy ensued re-allocation of funds from 'black schools' to schools with disadvantaged white Dutch pupils (SCP, 2009; Simons, 2011; Altinyelken and Karsten, 2015).

The policy change in view of extra governmental support for schools with disadvantaged children – measured according to their parents level of education – has added differentiations in the understanding of the notion of 'black schools'. From this latter vantage point 'black schools' are still perceived in the original sense, meaning schools with 70 or more percent children from non-Western migrants. 'Black schools' can also refer to (mixed) schools of which the majority of the children are from parents with a low education level. And it can also refer to schools with a majority of white Dutch children from parents with a low education and living in a deprived area (Simons, 2011). However, public discourse has not engaged into considering these latter two connotations as such.

As we have seen, the distinction between 'black' and 'white schools' entered public discourse after large numbers of migrant children were getting enrolled in schools in concentrated areas. Moreover, several studies point out that in general, white Dutch parents often choose a school for their child(eren) that connects to their own social and cultural background (Ladd, Fiske, and Ruijs, 2009; Karsten et al., 2006). Whenever the number of non-Western migrant children is increasing in a particular school, it raises concerns about the quality of education, which explains why white Dutch parents avoid such a school, even if it is located in close vicinity of their home. Therefore, these parents take their child(eren) out of such a school and choose for a 'white school', which in their opinion matches their social preferences. When large numbers of white Dutch parents follow this pattern, it is labelled as 'the white flight'. However, this pattern also occurs with parents of colour who have climbed the social ladder resulting from their own high level of education. It seems as if they too have a preference for 'white schools' since these are considered to offer better or higher study prospects for their child(eren). Therefore, some have come up with the notion of a 'black flight' to describe this latter phenomenon.

Furthermore, the housing policy of the Dutch government in the 1980s enabled white Dutch families hitherto living in deprived areas, but with access to financial resources, to move to privileged districts. The migrant families were left behind and when newly arrived migrants settled into the vacant houses, schools in these areas became almost fully populated by migrant children. The very few white Dutch parents who had remained often felt that their children would be excluded, thus deteriorating their chances for success. That

eventually caused them to move altogether, choosing to place their children in a ‘white school’ elsewhere.

These social dynamics have engendered ethnic-cultural segregation in education. Such is the case when a ‘white school’ is located in a particular district with predominantly non-Western migrants, or with the reverse situation. Hence, segregation in education implies that children from a specific ethnic-cultural background are spread disproportionately over schools in their districts or city. In response, 16 Dutch municipalities implemented policy towards desegregation in education with little to no success (Peters and Walraven, 2011). One reason therefore seems to be the inability of municipalities to convince white Dutch parents to choose for a school with many non-Western migrant children so that ethnic-cultural balance and diversity could be attained. But a more fundamental reason has to do with the prerogative parents have for making a free school choice (*vrije schoolkeuze*), which is legally embedded.

Ethnic-cultural segregation in education

The integration of non-Western migrant children into the Dutch society through their education has been on the political agenda since the 1980s (Altinyelken and Karsten, 2015). An underlying motive therefore seems to be the close relationship between, on the one hand ‘black’ and ‘white schools’ and, on the other, a growing concern about ethnic-cultural segregation in the Dutch education system (Stevens et al., 2011). The majority of pupils with a non-Western migrant background is concentrated in the Randstad. In 2006 about half of the total school population consisted of children with a non-Western migrant background (CBS, 2006). Little more than half of the total number of schools in the Randstad were considered to be ‘black schools’ (CBS, 2007).

Research conducted by the ‘ Kenniscentrum Gemengde Scholen’ (Wolfgram et al. 2009) demonstrated at one point that one third (33.4 %) of schools in the Randstad were considered to be ‘black schools’. The research data illustrates both a decline of the numbers of ‘black schools’ and an increase of the number of schools with lesser percentages of pupils with a non-Western migrant background.

Irrespective of a decreasing trend of segregation in education, notions such as ‘black’ and ‘white schools’ still persist in current public discourse. Against this background a group of educational scientist from the University of Amsterdam, recently demanded in an op-ed in the Dutch newspaper *Volkskrant* to abandon these terms (Altinyelken et al., 2017.) Moreover, a 2015 NRC report indicates that in several districts with a mixed population in Amsterdam, not all schools reflected the ethnic-cultural diversity of those districts. Thus, in 2008 ‘black’ and ‘white schools’ were still a common feature of the educational landscape of districts such as Oud-West, de Pijp, IJburg and Noord (Weeda, 2015).

However, studies conducted by FORUM (2014), a former Institute for Multicultural Affairs, corroborate this decrease in segregation in schools in the Netherlands of recent years. By comparing data about the development of segregation in 38 major municipalities, from 2005-2006 with data collected from 2009-2013 this decrease became visible. The data illustrates that in the major cities of the Netherlands, known as the ‘Randstad’ – i.e.

Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht – segregation in education had a higher decrease compared to other municipalities. These results echoed another study by Ladd, Fiske en Ruijs (2009) in which they employed multiple criteria that demonstrated a downward trend in educational segregation across the board. Therefore they compared data from 1997-2005 indicating an increase in segregation in all 38 municipalities with data from 2013, showing a decrease in segregation in the same municipalities studied.

't Palet, example of good practice

Gijsberts en Dagevos (2005) have demonstrated that there is no necessary causal relation between 'black schools' and poor quality education. 'Black schools' too can be innovative in leading their pupils to excel in a particular life domain. An example hereof is the 't Palet primary school. It is located in what is considered to a deprived area, the Schilderwijk in in the city of The Hague. After the schoolboard had decided upon making adaptations to the school's curriculum the pupils educational performance improved. In 1978 't Palet was a so called 'mixed school' with 50% of the schoolchildren from white Dutch parents and the other 50% from migrant parents. In 2017 the school had 0 children whose both parents are white and it is now considered to be a 'black school'. In 2010 the management opted for lengthening the school time with one extra hour that was reserved for sports, arts and music education. In 2016 the school was labeled 'excellent school' due to its outstanding performance in music education.

Toward a pedagogy of belonging, inclusivity and normality

The best practice example above illustrates that excellence is not the pivotal domain of a few core subjects such as math and language. More importantly is pupils' motivation to learn. Researchers point out that a sense of belonging is fundamental to human motivation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Moreover, being connected to a social peer group can enhance young people performance in formal education. They become more interested in school and enjoy their schooling even more (Wentzel and Caldwell, 1997). At the same time a link exists between not being part of a social group, thus being excluded, and rather poor school engagement (Hymel *et.al.*, 1996). Hence, a sense of belonging seems to be intertwined with feeling included, valued and accepted. It is in such an atmosphere that children develop a positive self-image. Healthy character building then becomes feasible. The implication of these study results is that the teacher must be equipped to facilitate a safe space where children not only feel comfortable with themselves, but also with one another, irrespective of the diversity of cultural, religious or philosophical backgrounds. Hull (2002) calls this the contribution of religious education to religious freedom, for religion can help make safe spaces in classrooms when treated in the right way of allowing freedom and respect towards all values based on very different religions and spiritualities. Then the feeling of 'we' will grow and allows all people involved to be empowered and the entire community to excel.

Context of Diversity

The core question now becomes: How can teachers in RE help create safe spaces that enable children to excel? The underlying assumption is that when children feel at home in a particular school, parents may be more keen to get involved and be supportive of the school. We think that RE teachers can utilize Bible stories to engage children in

conversations about the value of hospitality toward strangers (e.g. The Good Samaritan; The Lord's visit to Abram, etc.) and parallel stories in Quran or Vedas. Creating such safe and brave spaces where children experience a sense of belonging will ultimately engender a transformation from 'black' and 'white schools' into promising schools. That, we hope, may change public discourse and opinion of schools in general in the Netherlands.

We would like to teach students to look with an open mind at all those different people and customs in the classrooms. And then discover where they recognize themselves in, what can be of value to them in life. And that can be started in that diverse class group at school. The group is also diverse at a confessional school, like a Protestant or Catholic school; none of them are homogeneous. Go face to face with open eyes, go into real open dialogue. And then let all religions and philosophies come in. We need broad education in this area. Above all, apply knowledge, because pupils know very little about religions and philosophies. Often it is only the very limited and colored information that they get through the media so that their opinions are superficial and the nuance is lost; religions and religious groups are shaved over. There is a lot of ignorance among young people about religion, so cognitive knowledge is needed. Vermeer points out in this context that concepts and thinking skills must be taught. This allows students to interpret, understand and reflect religious phenomena (Vermeer 2012). And teach them the function and value of religions and philosophies through the lived faith. It is about gaining religious experiences yourself by observing what happens in you when you participate as completely as possible in religious rituals and, above all, that you connect with the other person and his convictions from your deepest values. This is preferably done with activating teaching methods, personal stories and excursions, so that religion can really be experienced. Because only 'looking at religious items, like a photo of candles with a statue of Mary or at the insight of a mosque in a movie', is static and looking from the outside. Then you look at the 'practice' as a kind of tourist. You have to look further, you have to experience something like that, or in other words: learn with all your senses what religion is. And share that in turn with people who really experience it: learning from each other's religious roots.

The teacher must therefore be an authentic teacher who is open to the experience of all those unique students in his or her class. In doing so, I connect with what Roebben calls "learning in diversity and interspiritual dialogue" (Roebben 2015, 70). It is important to know that in communication in religious education both sender and receiver must open themselves to the other; the expert, the teacher with her or his knowledge, attitude and skills, and the pupil who is taught with her or his knowledge, attitude and skills. Only when there is a real connection between teacher and pupil, can one truly learn.

Cognitive training, as mentioned before, is necessary to overcome this gap, but even more important religious education has to focus on the unique qualities of each pupil in the classroom. We, as RE teachers, have to keep trying to enhance his and her roots, make them strong human beings to face the challenges in their full everyday life. A genuine dialogue and well-designed activating exercises is what we hope to develop to fulfil this obligation as teachers at all primary and secondary schools, whether black or white, private or public. We work on developing evidence-based methods of interreligious learning to realize a change of perspective in the pupils themselves and in their class (Kienstra et al. In press).

We offer refresher courses for teachers to develop further here. We as teachers jointly create professional learning communities to share experiences, inspire each other and continue to develop methods together. Then the school becomes more excellent, as the example t Pallet, and the genuine core values of all pupils will be respected and empowered.

Nobody can make choices for the good life alone and nobody can stand firm without roots. Those roots can be found and developed by young people themselves. And that will work if we jointly deliver that too! Let students who want to become teachers experience what empowers them. Then they can teach pupils the rich traditions of religions and philosophies, and let them also experience what can help these young people to make choices for the good life. Than they can later make those choices as adults and become responsible citizens. Than, hopefully, there are so many brave spaces that even the suggestion of white or black school completely disappears in our vocabulary and way of thinking.

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